

THE BLUE ROOM.

It happened twice in my time. It will never happen again, they say, since Miss Erristoun (Mrs. Arthur, that is now,) and Mr. Calder-Maxwell between them found out the secret of the haunted room, and laid the ghost ; for ghost it was, though at the time Mr. Maxwell gave it another name, Latin, I fancy, but all I can remember about it now is that it somehow reminded me of poultry-rearing. I am the housekeeper at Mertoun Towers, as my aunt was before me, and her aunt before her, and first of all my great-grandmother, who was a distant cousin of the Laird, and had married the chaplain, but being left penniless at her husband's death, was thankful to accept the post which has ever since been occupied by one of her descendants. It gives us a sort of standing with the servants, being, as it were, related to the family ; and Sir Archibald and my Lady have always acknowledged the connection, and treated us with more freedom than would be accorded to ordinary dependants.

Mertoun has been my home from the time I was eighteen. Something occurred then of which, since it has nothing to do with this story, I need only say that it wiped out for ever any idea of marriage on my part, and I came to the Towers to be trained under my aunt's vigilant eye for the duties in which I was one day to succeed her.

Of course I knew there was a story about the blue tapestry room. Everyone knew that, though the old Laird had given strict orders that the subject should not be discussed among the

servants, and always discouraged any allusion to it on the part of his family and guests. But there is a strange fascination about everything connected with the supernatural, and orders or no orders, people, whether gentle or simple, will try to gratify their curiosity ; so a good deal of surreptitious talk went on both in the drawing-room and the servants' hall, and hardly a guest came to the house but would pay a visit to the Blue Room and ask all manner of questions about the ghost. The odd part of the business was that no one knew what the ghost was supposed to be, or even if there were any ghost at all. I tried hard to get my aunt to tell me some details of the legend, but she always reminded me of Sir Archibald's orders, and added that the tale most likely started with the superstitious fancy of people who lived long ago and were very ignorant, because a certain Lady Barbara Mertoun had died in that room.

I reminded her that people must have died, at some time or other, in pretty nearly every room in the house, and no one had thought of calling them haunted, or hinting that it was unsafe to sleep there.

She answered that Sir Archibald himself had used the Blue Room, and one or two other gentlemen, who had passed the night there for a wager, and they had neither seen nor heard anything unusual. For her part, she added, she did not hold with people wasting their time thinking of such folly, when they had much better be giving their minds to their proper business.

Somehow her professions of incredu-

lity did not ring true, and I wasn't satisfied, though I gave up asking questions. But if I said nothing, I thought the more, and often when my duties took me to the Blue Room I would wonder why, if nothing had happened there, and there was no real mystery, the room was never used ; it had not even a mattress on the fine carved bedstead, which was only covered by a sheet to keep it from the dust. And then I would steal into the portrait gallery to look at the great picture of the Lady Barbara, who had died in the full bloom of her youth, no one knew why, for she was just found one morning stiff and cold, stretched across that fine bed under the blue tapestried canopy.

She must have been a beautiful woman, with her great black eyes and splendid auburn hair, though I doubt her beauty was all on the outside, for she had belonged to the gayest set of the Court, which was none too respectable in those days, if half the tales one hears of it are true ; and indeed a modest lady would hardly have been painted in such a dress, all slipping off her shoulders, and so thin that one can see right through the stuff. There must have been something queer about her too, for they do say her father-in-law, who was known as the wicked Lord Mertoun, would not have her buried with the rest of the family ; but that might have been his spite, because he was angry that she had no child, and her husband, who was but a sickly sort of man, dying of consumption but a month later, there was no direct heir ; so that with the old Lord the title became extinct, and the estates passed to the Protestant branch of the family, of which the present Sir Archibald Mertoun is the head. Be that as it may, Lady Barbara lies by herself in the church-yard, near the lych-gate, under a grand marble tomb indeed, but all

alone, while her husband's coffin has its place beside those of his brothers who died before him, among their ancestors and descendants in the great vault under the chancel.

I often used to think about her, and wonder why she died, and how ; and then it happened and the mystery grew deeper than ever.

There was a family-gathering that Christmas, I remember, the first Christmas for many years that had been kept at Mertoun, and we had been very busy arranging the rooms for the different guests, for on New Year's Eve there was a ball in the neighbourhood, to which Lady Mertoun was taking a large party, and for that night, at least, the house was as full as it would hold.

I was in the linen-room, helping to sort the sheets and pillow-covers for the different beds, when my Lady came in with an open letter in her hand.

She began to talk to my aunt in a low voice, explaining something which seemed to have put her out, for when I returned from carrying a pile of linen to the head-housemaid, I heard her say : " It is too annoying to upset all one's arrangements at the last moment. Why couldn't she have left the girl at home and brought another maid, who could be squeezed in somewhere without any trouble ? "

I gathered that one of the visitors, Lady Grayburn, had written that she was bringing her companion, and as she had left her maid, who was ill, at home, she wanted the young lady to have a bedroom adjoining hers, so that she might be at hand to give any help that was required. The request seemed a trifling matter enough in itself, but it just so happened that there really was no room at liberty. Every bedroom on the first corridor was occupied, with the exception of the Blue Room, which, as ill-luck would have

it, chanced to be next to that arranged for Lady Grayburn.

My aunt made several suggestions, but none of them seemed quite practicable, and at last my Lady broke out: "Well, it cannot be helped; you must put Miss Wood in the Blue Room. It is only for one night, and she won't know anything about that silly story."

"Oh, my Lady!" my aunt cried, and I knew by her tone that she had not spoken the truth when she professed to think so lightly of the ghost.

"I can't help it," her Ladyship answered: "beside I don't believe there is anything really wrong with the room. Sir Archibald has slept there, and he found no cause for complaint."

"But a woman, a young woman," my aunt urged; "indeed I wouldn't run such a risk, my Lady; let me put one of the gentlemen in there, and Miss Wood can have the first room in the west corridor."

"And what use would she be to Lady Grayburn out there?" said her Ladyship. "Don't be foolish, my good Marris. Unlock the door between the two rooms; Miss Wood can leave it open if she feels nervous; but I shall not say a word about that foolish superstition, and I shall be very much annoyed if any one else does so."

She spoke as if that settled the question, but my aunt wasn't easy. "The Laird," she murmured; "what will he say to a lady being put to sleep there?"

"Sir Archibald does not interfere in household arrangements. Have the Blue Room made ready for Miss Wood at once. *I* will take the responsibility,—if there is any."

On that her Ladyship went away, and there was nothing for it but to carry out her orders. The Blue Room was prepared, a great fire lighted, and

when I went round last thing to see all was in order for the visitor's arrival, I couldn't but think how handsome and comfortable it looked. There were candles burning brightly on the toilet-table and chimney-piece, and a fine blaze of logs on the wide hearth. I saw nothing had been overlooked, and was closing the door when my eyes fell on the bed. It was crumpled just as if someone had thrown themselves across it, and I was vexed that the housemaids should have been so careless, especially with the smart new quilt. I went round, and patted up the feathers, and smoothed the counterpane, just as the carriages drove under the window.

By and by Lady Grayburn and Miss Wood came up-stairs, and knowing they had brought no maid, I went to assist in the unpacking. I was a long time in her Ladyship's room, and when I'd settled her I tapped at the next door and offered to help Miss Wood. Lady Grayburn followed me almost immediately to inquire the whereabouts of some keys. She spoke very sharply, I thought, to her companion, who seemed a timid, delicate slip of a girl, with nothing noticeable about her except her hair, which was lovely, pale golden, and heaped in thick coils all round her small head.

"You will certainly be late," Lady Grayburn said. "What an age you have been, and you have not half finished unpacking yet." The young lady murmured something about there being so little time. "You have had time to sprawl on the bed instead of getting ready," was the retort, and as Miss Wood meekly denied the imputation, I looked over my shoulder at the bed, and saw there the same strange indentation I had noticed before. It made my heart beat faster, for without any reason at all I felt certain that crease must have something to do with Lady Barbara.

Miss Wood didn't go to the ball. She had supper in the schoolroom with the young ladies' governess, and as I heard from one of the maids that she was to sit up for Lady Grayburn, I took her some wine and sandwiches about twelve o'clock. She stayed in the schoolroom, with a book, till the first party came home soon after two. I'd been round the rooms with the housemaid to see the fires were kept up, and I wasn't surprised to find that queer crease back on the bed again ; indeed, I sort of expected it. I said nothing to the maid, who didn't seem to have noticed anything out of the way, but I told my aunt, and though she answered sharply that I was talking nonsense, she turned quite pale, and I heard her mutter something under breath that sounded like "God help her !"

I slept badly that night, for, do what I would, the thought of that poor young lady alone in the Blue Room kept me awake and restless. I was nervous, I suppose, and once, just as I was dropping off, I started up, fancying I'd heard a scream. I opened my door and listened, but there wasn't a sound, and after waiting a bit I crept back to bed, and lay there shivering till I fell asleep.

The household wasn't astir as early as usual. Every one was tired after the late night, and tea wasn't to be sent to the ladies till half-past nine. My aunt said nothing about the ghost, but I noticed she was fidgety, and asked almost first thing if anyone had been to Miss Wood's room. I was telling her that Martha, one of the housemaids, had just taken up the tray, when the girl came running in with a scared, white face. "For pity's sake, Mrs. Marris," she cried, "come to the Blue Room ; something awful has happened !"

My aunt stopped to ask no questions. She ran straight up-stairs, and

as I followed I heard her muttering to herself, "I knew it, I knew it. Oh Lord ! what will my Lady feel like now ?"

If I live to be a hundred I shall never forget that poor girl's face. It was just as if she'd been frozen with terror. Her eyes were wide open and fixed, and her little hands clenched in the coverlet on each side of her as she lay across the bed in the very place where that crease had been.

Of course the whole house was aroused. Sir Archibald sent one of the grooms post-haste for the doctor, but he could do nothing when he came ; Miss Wood had been dead for at least five hours.

It was a sad business. All the visitors went away as soon as possible, except Lady Grayburn, who was obliged to stay for the inquest.

In his evidence, the doctor stated death was due to failure of heart's action, occasioned possibly by some sudden shock ; and though the jury did not say so in their verdict, it was an open secret that they blamed her Ladyship for permitting Miss Wood to sleep in the haunted room. No one could have reproached her more bitterly than she did herself, poor lady ; and if she had done wrong she certainly suffered for it, for she never recovered from the shock of that dreadful morning, and became more or less of an invalid till her death five years later.

All this happened in 184—. It was fifty years before another woman slept in the Blue Room, and fifty years had brought with them many changes. The old Laird was gathered to his fathers, and his son, the present Sir Archibald, reigned in his stead ; his sons were grown men, and Mr. Charles, the eldest, married, with a fine little boy of his own. My aunt had been dead many a year, and I was an old woman, though active

and able as ever to keep the maids up to their work. They take more looking after now, I think, than in the old days before there was so much talk of education, and when young women who took service thought less of dress and more of dusting. Not but what education is a fine thing in its proper place, that is, for gentlefolk. If Miss Erristoun, now, hadn't been the clever, strong-minded young lady she is, she'd never have cleared the Blue Room of its terrible secret, and lived to make Mr. Arthur the happiest man alive.

He'd taken a great deal of notice of her when she first came in the summer to visit Mrs. Charles, and I wasn't surprised to find she was one of the guests for the opening of the shooting-season. It wasn't a regular house-party (for Sir Archibald and Lady Mertoun were away), but just half-a-dozen young ladies, friends of Mrs. Charles, who was but a girl herself, and as many gentlemen that Mr. Charles and Mr. Arthur had invited. And very gay they were, what with lunches at the covert-side, and tennis-parties, and little dances got up at a few hours' notice, and sometimes of an evening they'd play hide-and-seek all over the house just as if they'd been so many children.

It surprised me at first to see Miss Erristoun, who was said to be so learned, and had held her own with all the gentlemen at Cambridge, playing with the rest like any ordinary young lady; but she seemed to enjoy the fun as much as any one, and was always first in any amusement that was planned. I didn't wonder at Mr. Arthur's fancying her, for she was a handsome girl, tall and finely made, and carried herself like a princess. She had a wonderful head of hair, too, so long, her maid told me, it touched the ground as she sat on a chair to have it brushed. Every-

body seemed to take to her, but I soon noticed it was Mr. Arthur or Mr. Calder-Maxwell she liked best to be with.

Mr. Maxwell is a Professor now, and a great man at Oxford; but then he was just an undergraduate the same as Mr. Arthur, though more studious, for he'd spend hours in the library poring over those old books full of queer black characters, that they say the wicked Lord Mertoun collected in the time of King Charles the Second. Now and then Miss Erristoun would stay indoors to help him, and it was something they found out in their studies that gave them the clue to the secret of the Blue Room.

For a long time after Miss Wood's death all mention of the ghost was strictly forbidden. Neither the Laird nor her Ladyship could bear the slightest allusion to the subject, and the Blue Room was kept locked, except when it had to be cleaned and aired. But as the years went by the edge of the tragedy wore off, and by degrees it grew to be just a story that people talked about in much the same way as they had done when I first came to the Towers; and if many believed in the mystery and speculated as to what the ghost could be, there were others who didn't hesitate to declare Miss Wood's dying in that room was a mere coincidence, and had nothing to do with supernatural agency. Miss Erristoun was one of those who held most strongly to this theory. She didn't believe a bit in ghosts, and said straight out that there wasn't any of the tales told of haunted houses which could not be traced to natural causes, if people had courage and science enough to investigate them thoroughly.

It had been very wet all that day, and the gentlemen had stayed indoors, and nothing would serve Mrs. Charles

but they should all have an old-fashioned tea in my room and "talk ghosts," as she called it. They made me tell them all I knew about the Blue Room, and it was then, when every one was discussing the story and speculating as to what the ghost could be, that Miss Erristoun spoke up. "The poor girl had heart-complaint," she finished by saying, "and she would have died the same way in any other room."

"But what about the other people who have slept there?" someone objected.

"They did not die. Old Sir Archibald came to no harm, neither did Mr. Hawksworth, nor the other man. They were healthy, and had plenty of pluck, so they saw nothing."

"They were not women," put in Mrs. Charles; "you see the ghost only appears to the weaker sex."

"That proves the story to be a mere legend," Miss Erristoun said with decision. "First it was reported that everyone who slept in the room died. Then one or two men did sleep there, and remained alive; so the tale had to be modified, and since one woman could be proved to have died suddenly there, the fatality was represented as attaching to women only. If a girl with a sound constitution and good nerve were once to spend the night in that room, your charming family-spectre would be discredited for ever."

There was a perfect chorus of dissent. None of the ladies could agree, and most of the gentlemen doubted whether any woman's nerve would stand the ordeal. The more they argued the more Miss Erristoun persisted in her view, till at last Mrs. Charles got vexed, and cried: "Well, it is one thing to talk about it, and another to do it. Confess now, Edith, you daren't sleep in that room yourself."

"I dare and I will," she answered directly. "I don't believe in ghosts,

and I am ready to stand the test. I will sleep in the Blue Room to-night, if you like, and to-morrow morning you will have to confess that whatever there may be against the haunted chamber, it is not a ghost."

I think Mrs. Charles was sorry she'd spoken then, for they all took Miss Erristoun up, and the gentlemen were for laying wagers as to whether she'd see anything or not. When it was too late she tried to laugh aside her challenge as absurd, but Miss Erristoun wouldn't be put off. She said she meant to see the thing through, and if she wasn't allowed to have a bed made up, she'd carry in her blankets and pillows, and camp out on the floor.

The others were all laughing and disputing together, but I saw Mr. Maxwell look at her very curiously. Then he drew Mr. Arthur aside, and began to talk in an undertone. I couldn't hear what he said, but Mr. Arthur answered quite short:

"It's the maddest thing I ever heard of, and I won't allow it for a moment."

"She will not ask your permission perhaps," Mr. Maxwell retorted. Then he turned to Mrs. Charles, and inquired how long it was since the Blue Room had been used, and if it was kept aired. I could speak to that, and when he'd heard that there was no bedding there, but that fires were kept up regularly, he said he meant to have the first refusal of the ghost, and if he saw nothing it would be time enough for Miss Erristoun to take her turn.

Mr. Maxwell had a kind of knack of settling things, and somehow with his quiet manner always seemed to get his own way. Just before dinner he came to me with Mrs. Charles, and said it was all right, I was to get the room made ready quietly, not for all the servants to know, and he was going to sleep there.

I heard next morning that he came down to breakfast as usual. He'd had an excellent night, he said, and never slept better.

It was wet again that morning, raining "cats and dogs," but Mr. Arthur went out in it all. He'd almost quarrelled with Miss Erristoun, and was furious with Mr. Maxwell for encouraging her in her idea of testing the ghost-theory, as they called it. Those two were together in the library most of the day, and Mrs. Charles was chaffing Miss Erristoun as they went up-stairs to dress, and asking her if she found the demons interesting. Yes, she said, but there was a page missing in the most exciting part of the book. They could not make head or tail of the context for some time, and then Mr. Maxwell discovered that a leaf had been cut out. They talked of nothing else all through dinner, the butler told me, and Miss Erristoun seemed so taken up with her studies, I hoped she'd forgotten about the haunted room. But she wasn't one of the sort to forget. Later in the evening I came across her standing with Mr. Arthur in the corridor. He was talking very earnestly, and I saw her shrug her shoulders and just look up at him and smile, in a sort of way that meant she wasn't going to give in. I was slipping quietly by, for I didn't want to disturb them, when Mr. Maxwell came out of the billiard-room. "It's our game," he said; "won't you come and play the tie?"

"I'm quite ready," Miss Erristoun answered, and was turning away, when Mr. Arthur laid his hand on her arm. "Promise me first," he urged, "promise me that much, at least."

"How tiresome you are!" she said quite pettishly. "Very well then, I promise; and now please, don't worry me any more."

Mr. Arthur watched her go back to

the billiard-room with his friend, and he gave a sort of groan. Then he caught sight of me and came along the passage. "She won't give it up," he said, and his face was quite white. "I've done all I can; I'd have telegraphed to my father, but I don't know where they'll stay in Paris, and anyway there'd be no time to get an answer. Mrs. Marris, she's going to sleep in that d—— room, and if anything happens to her—I—" he broke off short, and threw himself on to the window-seat, hiding his face on his folded arms.

I could have cried for sympathy with his trouble. Mr. Arthur has always been a favourite of mine, and I felt downright angry with Miss Erristoun for making him so miserable just out of a bit of bravado.

"I think they are all mad," he went on presently. "Charley ought to have stopped the whole thing at once, but Kate and the others have talked him round. He professes to believe there's no danger, and Maxwell has got his head full of some rubbish he has found in those beastly books on Demonology, and he's backing her up. She won't listen to a word I say. She told me point-blank she'd never speak to me again if I interfered. She doesn't care a hang for me; I know that now, but I can't help it; I—I'd give my life for her."

I did my best to comfort him, saying Miss Erristoun wouldn't come to any harm; but it wasn't a bit of use, for I didn't believe in my own assurances. I felt nothing but ill could come of such tempting of Providence, and I seemed to see that other poor girl's terrible face as it had looked when we found her dead in that wicked room. However, it is a true saying that "a wilful woman will have her way," and we could do nothing to prevent Miss Erristoun's risking her life; but I made up my

mind to one thing, whatever other people might do, *I* wasn't going to bed that night.

I'd been getting the winter-hangings into order, and the upholstress had used the little boudoir at the end of the long corridor for her work. I made up the fire, brought in a fresh lamp, and when the house was quiet, I crept down and settled myself there to watch. It wasn't ten yards from the door of the Blue Room, and over the thick carpet I could pass without making a sound, and listen at the keyhole. Miss Erristoun had promised Mr. Arthur she would not lock her door; it was the one concession he'd been able to obtain from her. The ladies went to their rooms about eleven, but Miss Erristoun stayed talking to Mrs. Charles for nearly an hour while her maid was brushing her hair. I saw her go to the Blue Room, and by and by Louise left her, and all was quiet. It must have been half-past one before I thought I heard something moving outside. I opened the door and looked out, and there was Mr. Arthur standing in the passage. He gave a start when he saw me. "You are sitting up," he said, coming into the room; "then you do believe there is evil work on hand to-night? The others have gone to bed, but I can't rest; it's no use my trying to sleep. I meant to stay in the smoking-room, but it is so far away; I couldn't hear there even if she called for help. I've listened at the door; there isn't a sound. Can't you go in and see if it's all right? Oh, Marris, if she should——"

I knew what he meant, but I wasn't going to admit *that* possible,—yet. "I can't go into a lady's room without any reason," I said; "but I've been to the door every few minutes for the last hour and more. It wasn't till half-past twelve that Miss Erristoun

stopped moving about, and I don't believe, Mr. Arthur, that God will let harm come to her, without giving those that care for her some warning. I mean to keep on listening, and if there's the least hint of anything wrong, why I'll go to her at once, and you are at hand here to help."

I talked to him a bit more till he seemed more reasonable, and then we sat there waiting, hardly speaking a word except when, from time to time, I went outside to listen. The house was deathly quiet; there was something terrible, I thought, in the stillness; not a sign of life anywhere save just in the little boudoir, where Mr. Arthur paced up and down, or sat with a strained look on his face, watching the door.

As three o'clock struck, I went out again. There is a window in the corridor, angle for angle with the boudoir-door. As I passed, some one stepped from behind the curtains and a voice whispered: "Don't be frightened Mrs. Marris; it is only me, Calder-Maxwell. Mr. Arthur is there, isn't he?" He pushed open the boudoir door. "May I come in?" he said softly. "I guessed you'd be about, Mertoun. I'm not at all afraid myself, but if there *is* anything in that little legend, it is as well for some of us to be on hand. It was a good idea of yours to get Mrs. Marris to keep watch with you."

Mr. Arthur looked at him as black as thunder. "If you didn't *know* there was something in it," he said, "you wouldn't be here now; and knowing that, you're nothing less than a blackguard for egging that girl on to risk her life, for the sake of trying to prove your insane theories. You are no friend of mine after this, and I'll never willingly see you or speak to you again."

I was fairly frightened at his words, and for how Mr. Maxwell

might take them ; but he just smiled, and lighted a cigarette, quite cool and quiet.

"I'm not going to quarrel with you, old chap," he said. "You're a bit on the strain to-night, and when a man has nerves he mustn't be held responsible for all his words." Then he turned to me. "You're a sensible woman, Mrs. Marris, and a brave one too, I fancy. If I stay here with Mr. Arthur, will you keep close outside Miss Erristoun's door ? She may talk in her sleep quietly ; that's of no consequence ; but if she should cry out, go in at once, *at once*, you understand ; we shall hear you, and follow immediately."

At that Mr. Arthur was on his feet. "You know more than you pretend," he cried. "You slept in that room last night. By Heaven, if you've played any trick on her I'll——"

Mr. Maxwell held the door open. "Will you go, please, Mrs. Marris ?" he said in his quiet way. "Mertoun, don't be a d—— fool."

I went as he told me, and I give you my word I was all ears, for I felt certain Mr. Maxwell knew more than we did, and that he expected something to happen.

It seemed like hours, though I know now it could not have been more than a quarter of that time, before I could be positive someone was moving behind that closed door.

At first I thought it was only my own heart, which was beating against my ribs like a hammer ; but soon I could distinguish footsteps, and a sort of murmur like someone speaking continuously, but very low. Then a voice (it was Miss Erristoun's this time) said, "No, it is impossible ; I am dreaming, I must be dreaming." There was a kind of rustling as though she were moving quickly across the floor. I had my fingers on the handle, but I

seemed as if I'd lost power to stir ; I could only wait for what might come next.

Suddenly she began to say something out loud. I could not make out the words, which didn't sound like English, but almost directly she stopped short. "I can't remember any more," she cried in a troubled tone. "What shall I do ? I can't——" There was a pause. Then—"No, no !" she shrieked. "Oh, Arthur, Arthur !"

At that my strength came back to me, and I flung open the door.

There was a night-lamp burning on the table, and the room was quite light. Miss Erristoun was standing by the bed ; she seemed to have backed up against it ; her hands were down at her sides, her fingers clutching at the quilt. Her face was white as a sheet, and her eyes staring wide with terror, as well they might, —I know I never had such a shock in my life, for if it was my last word, I swear there was a man standing close in front of her. He turned and looked at me as I opened the door, and I saw his face as plain as I did hers. He was young and very handsome, and his eyes shone like an animal's when you see them in the dark.

"Arthur !" Miss Erristoun gasped again, and I saw she was fainting. I sprang forward, and caught her by the shoulders just as she was falling back on to the bed.

It was all over in a second. Mr. Arthur had her in his arms, and when I looked up there were only us four in the room, for Mr. Maxwell had followed on Mr. Arthur's heels, and was kneeling beside me with his fingers on Miss Erristoun's pulse. "It's only a faint," he said, "she'll come round directly. Better take her out of this at once ; here's a dressing-gown." He threw the wrapper round

her, and would have helped to raise her, but Mr. Arthur needed no assistance. He lifted Miss Erristoun as if she'd been a baby, and carried her straight to the boudoir. He laid her on the couch and knelt beside her, chafing her hands. "Get the brandy out of the smoking room, Maxwell," he said. "Mrs. Marris, have you any salts handy?"

I always carry a bottle in my pocket, so I gave it to him, before I ran after Mr. Maxwell, who had lighted a candle, and was going for the brandy. "Shall I wake Mr. Charles and the servants?" I cried. "He'll be hiding somewhere, but he hasn't had time to get out of the house yet."

He looked as if he thought I was crazed. "He—who?" he asked.

"The man," I said; "there was a man in Miss Erristoun's room. I'll call up Soames and Robert."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he said sharply. "There was no man in that room."

"There was," I retorted, "for I saw him; and a great powerful man too. Someone ought to go for the police before he has time to get off."

Mr. Maxwell was always an odd sort of gentleman, but I didn't know what to make of the way he behaved then. He just leaned against the wall, and laughed till the tears came into his eyes.

"It is no laughing matter that I can see," I told him quite short, for I was angry at his treating the matter so lightly; "and I consider it no more than my duty to let Mr. Charles know that there's a burglar on the premises."

He grew grave at once then. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Marris," he said seriously; "but I couldn't help smiling at the idea of the police. The vicar would be more to the point, all things considered. You really must

not think of rousing the household; it might do Miss Erristoun a great injury, and could in no case be of the slightest use. Don't you understand? It was not a man at all you saw, it was an—well, it was what haunts the Blue Room."

Then he ran downstairs leaving me fairly dazed, for I'd made so sure what I'd seen was a real man, that I'd clean forgotten all about the ghost.

Miss Erristoun wasn't long regaining consciousness. She swallowed the brandy we gave her like a lamb, and sat up bravely, though she started at every sound, and kept her hand in Mr. Arthur's like a frightened child. It was strange, seeing how independent and stand-off she'd been with him before, but she seemed all the sweeter for the change. It was as if they'd come to an understanding without any words; and, indeed, he must have known she had cared for him all along, when she called out his name in her terror.

As soon as she'd recovered herself a little, Mr. Maxwell began asking questions. Mr. Arthur would have stopped him, but he insisted that it was of the greatest importance to hear everything while the impression was fresh; and when she had got over the first effort, Miss Erristoun seemed to find relief in telling her experience. She sat there with one hand in Mr. Arthur's while she spoke, and Mr. Maxwell wrote down what she said in his pocket-book.

She told us she went to bed quite easy, for she wasn't the least nervous, and being tired she soon dropped off to sleep. Then she had a sort of dream, I suppose, for she thought she was in the same room, only differently furnished, all but the bed. She described exactly how everything was arranged. She had the strangest feeling too, that she was not herself but someone else, and that she was

going to do something,—something that must be done, though she was frightened to death all the time, and kept stopping to listen at the inner door, expecting someone would hear her moving about and call out for her to go to them. That in itself was queer, for there was nobody sleeping in the adjoining room. In her dream, she went on to say, she saw a curious little silver brazier, one that stands in a cabinet in the picture-gallery (a fine example of *cinque cento* work, I think I've heard my Lady call it), and this she remembered holding in her hands a long time, before she set it on a little table beside the bed. Now the bed in the Blue Room is very handsome, richly carved on the cornice and frame, and especially on the posts, which are a foot square at the base and covered with relief-work in a design of fruit and flowers. Miss Erristoun said she went to the left-hand post at the foot, and after passing her hand over the carving, she seemed to touch a spring in one of the centre flowers, and the panel fell outwards like a lid, disclosing a secret cupboard out of which she took some papers and a box. She seemed to know what to do with the papers, though she couldn't tell us what was written on them; and she had a distinct recollection of taking a pastille from the box, and lighting it in the silver brazier. The smoke curled up and seemed to fill the whole room with a heavy perfume, and the next thing she remembered was that she awoke to find herself standing in the middle of the floor, and,—what I had seen when I opened the door was there.

She turned quite white when she came to that part of the story, and shuddered. "I couldn't believe it," she said; "I tried to think I was still dreaming, but I wasn't, I wasn't. It was real, and it was there, and,—oh, it was horrible!"

She hid her face against Mr. Arthur's shoulder. Mr. Maxwell sat, pencil in hand, staring at her. "I was right then," he said. "I felt sure I was; but it seemed incredible."

"It is incredible," said Miss Erristoun; "but it is true, frightfully true. When I realised that I was awake, that it was actually real, I tried to remember the charge, you know, out of the office of exorcism, but I couldn't get through it. The words went out of my head; I felt my will-power failing; I was paralysed, as though I could make no effort to help myself and then,—then I—," she looked at Mr. Arthur and blushed all over her face and neck. "I thought of you, and I called,—I had a feeling that you would save me."

Mr. Arthur made no more ado about us than if we'd been a couple of dummies. He just put his arms round her and kissed her, while Mr. Maxwell and I looked the other way.

After a bit, Mr. Maxwell said: "One more question, please; what was it like?"

She answered after thinking for a minute. "It was like a man, tall and very handsome. I have an impression that its eyes were blue and very bright." Mr. Maxwell looked at me inquiringly, and I nodded. "And dressed?" he asked. She began to laugh almost hysterically. "It sounds too insane for words, but I think,—I am almost positive it wore ordinary evening dress."

"It is impossible," Mr. Arthur cried. "You were dreaming the whole time, that proves it."

"It doesn't," Mr. Maxwell contradicted. "They usually appeared in the costume of the day. You'll find that stated particularly both by Scott and Glanvil; Sprenger gives an instance too. Besides, Mrs. Marris thought it was a burglar, which argues that the,—the manifestation was objective,

and presented no striking peculiarity in the way of clothing."

"What?" Miss Erristoun exclaimed. "You saw it too?" I told her exactly what I had seen. My description tallied with hers in everything, but the white shirt and tie, which from my position at the door I naturally should not be able to see.

Mr. Maxwell snapped the elastic round his note-book. For a long time he sat silently staring at the fire. "It is almost past belief," he said at last, speaking half to himself, "that such a thing could happen at the end of the nineteenth century, in these scientific rationalistic times that we think such a lot about, we, who look down from our superior intellectual height on the benighted superstitions of the Middle Ages." He gave an odd little laugh. "I'd like to get to the bottom of this business. I have a theory, and in the interest of psychical research and common humanity, I'd like to work it out. Miss Erristoun, you ought, I know, to have rest and quiet, and it is almost morning; but will you grant me one request. Before you are overwhelmed with questions, before you are made to relate your experience till the impression of to-night's adventure loses edge and clearness, will you go with Mertoun and myself to the Blue Room, and try to find the secret panel?"

"She shall never set foot inside that door again," Mr. Arthur began hotly, but Miss Erristoun laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Wait a moment, dear," she said gently; "let us hear Mr. Maxwell's reasons. Do you think," she went on, "that my dream had a foundation in fact; that something connected with that dreadful thing is really concealed about the room?"

"I think," he answered, "that you hold the clue to the mystery, and I believe, could you repeat the action of

your dream, and open the secret panel, you might remove for ever the legacy of one woman's reckless folly. Only if it is to be done at all, it must be soon, before the impression has had time to fade."

"It shall be done now," she answered; "I am quite myself again. Feel my pulse; my nerves are perfectly steady."

Mr. Arthur broke out into angry protestations. She had gone through more than enough for one night, he said, and he wouldn't have her health sacrificed to Maxwell's whims.

I have always thought Miss Erristoun handsome, but never, not even on her wedding-day, did she look so beautiful as then when she stood up in her heavy white wrapper, with all her splendid hair loose on her shoulders.

"Listen," she said; "if God gives us a plain work to do, we must do it at any cost. Last night I didn't believe in anything I could not understand. I was so full of pride in my own courage and common-sense, that I wasn't afraid to sleep in that room and prove the ghost was all superstitious nonsense. I have learned there are forces of which I know nothing, and against which my strength was utter weakness. God took care of me, and sent help in time; and if He has opened a way by which I may save other women from the danger I escaped, I should be worse than ungrateful were I to shirk the task. Bring the lamp, Mr. Maxwell, and let us do what we can." Then she put both hands on Mr. Arthur's shoulders. "Why are you troubled?" she said sweetly. "You will be with me, and how can I be afraid?"

It never strikes me as strange now that burglaries and things can go on in a big house at night, and not a soul one whit the wiser. There were five

people sleeping in the rooms on that corridor while we tramped up and down without disturbing one of them. Not but what we went as quietly as we could, for Mr. Maxwell made it clear that the less was known about the actual facts, the better. He went first, carrying the lamp, and we followed. Miss Erristoun shivered as her eyes fell on the bed, across which that dreadful crease showed plain, and I knew she was thinking of what might have been, had help not been at hand.

Just for a minute she faltered, then she went bravely on, and began feeling over the carved woodwork for the spring of the secret panel. Mr. Maxwell held the lamp close, but there was nothing to show any difference between that bit of carving and the other three posts. For full ten minutes she tried, and so did the gentlemen, and it seemed as though the dream would turn out a delusion after all, when all at once Miss Erristoun cried, "I have found it," and with a little jerk, the square of wood fell forward, and there was the cupboard just as she had described it to us.

It was Mr. Maxwell who took out the things, for Mr. Arthur wouldn't let Miss Erristoun touch them. There were a roll of papers and a little silver box. At the sight of the box she gave a sort of cry; "That is it," she said, and covered her face with her hands.

Mr. Maxwell lifted the lid, and emptied out two or three pastilles. Then he unfolded the papers, and before he had fairly glanced at the sheet of parchment covered with queer black characters, he cried, "I knew it, I knew it! It is the missing leaf." He seemed quite wild with excitement. "Come along," he said. "Bring the light, Mertoun; I always said it was no ghost, and now the whole thing is as clear as day-

light. You see," he went on, as we gathered round the table in the boudoir, "so much depended on there being an heir. That was the chief cause of the endless quarrels between old Lord Mertoun and Barbara. He had never approved of the marriage, and was for ever reproaching the poor woman with having failed in the first duty of an only son's wife. His will shows that he did not leave her a farthing in event of her husband dying without issue. Then the feud with the Protestant branch of the family was very bitter, and the Sir Archibald of that day had three boys, he having married (about the same time as his cousin) Lady Mary Sarum, who had been Barbara's rival at Court and whom Barbara very naturally hated. So when the doctors pronounced Dennis Mertoun to be dying of consumption, his wife got desperate, and had recourse to black magic. It is well known that the old man's collection of works on Demonology was the most complete in Europe. Lady Barbara must have had access to the books, and it was she who cut out this leaf. Probably Lord Mertoun discovered the theft and drew his own conclusions. That would account for his refusal to admit her body to the family vault. The Mertouns were staunch Romanists, and it is one of the deadly sins, you know, meddling with sorcery. Well, Barbara contrived to procure the pastilles, and she worked out the spell according to the directions given here, and then,—Good God! Mertoun, what have you done?"

For before any one could interfere to check him, Mr. Arthur had swept papers, box, pastilles, and all off the table and flung them into the fire. The thick parchment curled and shrivelled on the hot coals, and a queer, faint smell like incense spread heavily through the room. Mr.

Arthur stepped to the window and threw the casement wide open. Day was breaking, and a sweet fresh wind swept in from the east which was all rosy with the glow of the rising sun.

"It is a nasty story," he said; "and if there be any truth in it, for the credit of the family and the name of a dead woman, let it rest for ever. We will keep our own counsel about to-night's work. It is enough for others to know that the spell of the Blue Room is broken, since a brave, pure-minded girl has dared to face its unknown mystery and has laid the ghost."

Mr. Calder-Maxwell considered a

moment. "I believe you are right," he said, presently, with an air of resignation. "I agree to your proposition, and I surrender my chance of world-wide celebrity among the votaries of Psychical Research; but I do wish, Mertoun, you would call things by their proper names. It was *not* a ghost. It was an——"

But as I said, all I can remember now of the word he used is, that it somehow put me in mind of poultry-rearing.

NOTE.—The reader will observe that the worthy Mrs. Marris, though no student of Sprenger, unconsciously discerned the root-affinity of the *incubator* of the hen-yard and the *incubus* of the **MALLEUS MALEFICARUM**.

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[One Shilling

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